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ABSTRACT

The rhetoric and results of efforts to empower and professionalize teachers are examined to gain insight into ways in which the language of educational reform functions in both maintaining and changing power relations. This critical analysis clarifies how the ways people communicate both influence and are influenced by the structures and forces of social institutions, e.g., schools, universities, unions, and school boards. How the ideology of professionalism operates is illustrated by examining two realms of authority related to schooling: (1) organization-management authority over schools (characteristically, political and social); and (2) educational authority within the schools (substance matters, such as curriculum content, pedagogy, etc.). The analysis concurs with findings of other researchers that even relatively neutral statements reflect acts of valuation. It is concluded that the interests served in the process of professionalizing teaching may not include the interests of the teachers themselves. To further these interests, teachers will have to regain control over the curriculum as well as school organization issues and develop a much stronger voice in the production of knowledge about teaching. (JD)

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Teacher Empowerment and the Ideology of Professionalism

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Teacher Empowerment and the Ideology of Professionalism

Distinguishing fact from opinion has been often cited as a basic skill needed for effective work in social studies. Social studies methods books outline how teachers should use sources, such as newspapers, to help students develop the skill of distinguishing between those statements based on verifiable information (facts) and those statements about which reasonable people might differ (opinions) (Wesley and Wronski 1964; New York State Social Studies Syllabus 1987). As one methods text stated, "the careful reader soon senses that he [sic] is often getting a mixture of facts and opinions. He soon learns to detect the qualitative adjectives and the emotionally charged words and to sense when the author is stating opinions and when he is sticking to the facts" (Wesley and Wronski 1964, 197).

Unfortunately, as you already know, distinguishing between facts and opinions is not usually so simple as presented in this example. In Hunt and Metcalf's now classic methods text they note that:

> Careful analysis suggest that the distinction commonly made between judgments of fact and judgments of value is misleading...The usual distinction conveys the notion that judgments of fact are divorced from acts of evaluation; that they are merely true or false descriptions of a physical reality outside of the observer--objective, exact, and dependable; and that

> judgments of value refer to nothing existent or substantial...It is misleading to suppose that any such hard-and-fast distinction can be made between statements...In one sense all statements are evaluative...Even relatively neutral statements may reflect acts of valuation...It seems likely that all thought involves the making of valuations--continuous selection of what is important in relation to one's ends. (1968, p. 130)

What would a careful analysis of current educational thought reveal about the valuations behind calls for reforms such as teacher empowerment and professionalism? By examining the rhetoric and results of efforts to empower and professionalize teachers, we might gain insight into how the language of educational reform functions in both maintaining and changing power relations. This type of critical analysis can help us better understand how the ways we communicate influence and are influenced by the structures and forces of social institutions, (such as schools, universities, unions, and school boards). It can also reveal these processes allowing people to become more conscious of them and more able to resist and change them.

The analysis might start with the following statement: "Efforts to achieve empowerment for teachers, such as shared decision-making in schools, have been positive steps toward a professional and autonomous role for teachers in schools." Is this statement a fact or an opinion?

Answering this question will involved an investigation of the origins of our ideas about teacher professionalism and uncovering how these ideas operate to serve particular social, economic, and political interests--that is, uncovering the ideology of professionalism. I will attempt to illustrate how the ideology of professionalism operates by examining two realms of authority related to schooling: (a) ogranization--management authority over schools (characteristically political and social) and (b) educational authority within the schools (substance matters such as curriculum content, pedagogy, etc.). I'll begin with the latter of these realms.

Academic Knowledge and Curricular Control

The recent history of teaching is a history of ever increasing state intervention in teaching and curriculum development (Apple 1986). In the 1950's and 1960's America's educational "crisis" was defined in relation to the scientific and ideological advances of the Soviet Union. The schools were defined as a tool of national power. The economic, ideological, and military struggle with the Soviet Union, therefore, hinged on setting the schools straight.

As Michael Apple points out in his book Education and Power, during this particular era of reform there was "strong pressure from academics, capital, and the state to reinstitute academic disciplinary knowledge as the most 'legitimate' content for the schools" (1986, p. 36). As we all know, the educational "crisis" of the 1950's and 1960's

resulted in the production of a great number of curriculum programs intended for use in elementary and secondary schools. It is important to note that these programs were developed, for the most part, by individuals outside of the schools. The focus was on producing curriculum materials that were academically rigorous, systematic and that left little room for teacher judgment in their implementation.

In many of these curriculum programs (particularly those intended for use at the elementary level), everything a teacher needed was provided, with plans and activities prespecified. The cost of the curriculum development was subsidized by the government and the National Defense Education Act allowed schools to be reimbursed for purchasing the materials. The new curricula were attractive because they had been developed by the "experts" and the cost of purchasing the materials was low. Most schools purchased the curricula because it seemed illogical not to.

If you are familiar with these curriculum projects (e.g., High School Geography Project, MACOS, etc.) you know that they did not have a lasting impact (if any) on the way social studies was taught in schools. Teachers resisted these curriculum innovations by teaching the "new math" and the "new social studies" in the same manner as the old math and social studies.

The state's role in sponsoring changes in curriculum and teaching practice in the 1950's and 1960's is important, however, as an example of how attempts to rationalize

education have lead to a means-ends argument that ultimately justifies a reduction in teachers' authority to make decisions regarding curriculum and pedagogy. Conformity and standardized practice rather than professionalism and autonomy are the result of such approaches to curricular reform.

Our current educational "crisis" and proposals for fixing the schools in many ways are reflective of the what occurred 30 years ago. Japan has been substituted for Soviet Union as the "dark incentive" for restructuring the schools (Feinberg 1990). The proposals presented in national reports such as A Nation At Risk and The Twentieth Century Fund's Making the Grade once again focus on the schools as the key to maintaining America's economic and military superiority. As the National Commission puts it, "Education is one of the chief engines of a society's material well-being....Citizens also know in their bones that the safety of the United States depends principally on the wit, skill, and spirit of the self-confident people, today and tomorrow" (p. 17).

What these reports (and more broadly the efforts of the New Right) represent is an attempt to "intervene 'on the terrain of ordinary, contradictory common-sense,' to 'interrupt, renovate, and transform in a more systematic direction' people's practical consciousness" (Apple, 1990, p. 38). What has been accomplished is a translation of an economic doctrine into the language of experience, common-

sense, and moral imperative; a language that leads to the loss of control and rationalization of teachers' work.

An example of the current version of this argument may be helpful. Social studies teaching and curricula are seen as bland and non-substantive. What is lacking is a fullness of knowledge, an objective picture of world realities. The more rapid the pace of change in our world (the more culturally diverse the nation becomes), the more critical it is for us to remember and understand the central ideas, events, people and works that have shaped "our" (white, middle class, male) society. The former ways of teaching and curricular control are neither powerful nor efficient enough for this situation. Teachers aren't sophisticated or knowledgeable enough, so we must call in a group of "nationally recognized scholars" to revamp the curriculum and to develop accountability systems to make certain that the new curricula actually reach the classrooms (e.g., increase in mandated testing at all levels--in New York State an increase from one to six state prepared social studies tests.

Contradictory consequences can be seen in both past and current curriculum reform movements. Whether by the teacher-proof curricula of an earlier era, or by highly centralized curriculum change with extensive accountability mechanisms, such as the one in New York State, teachers have been systematically "freed" from making decisions in the realm of educational authority. By "freeing" teachers of

the responsibility for conceptualizing, planning, and evaluating the curricula they teach, these movements helped to legitimate new forms of control and greater state intervention in teaching and curriculum. Technical and industrial models (that have grown out of Taylorism) have been used for systematic integration of testing, objectives, and curriculum; competency-based instruction, prepackaged curricula, etc. Models that leave little or no room for teachers to exercise autonomous professional judgment about curriculum or to define and enforce professional standards of practice.

Intensification, Professionalism, and Teaching

The "reform" mechanisms that have been briefly outlined here illustrate how the separation of conception from execution in teachers' work as had a deskilling/reskilling effect. When jobs are deskilled, the knowledge that was controlled and used by workers in carrying out their day to day lives on their jobs goes somewhere. In its place, new more routinized techniques are require to complete the job (reskilling).

In addition to affecting teachers' control of decisions about curriculum and pedagogy, this process also works to redefine the organization/management structure of schools. The process of deskilling/reskilling is one in which the control of the teaching (labor) process is changed. For example, skills that teachers have developed has a result of education and job experience are broken into discreet units

and redefined into specialized jobs by management (e.g., curriculum conceptualization is centralized at the state level; evaluation is done by standardized tests; resource room teachers handle remediation; and students are organized by tracks for teaching). The redefinition and specialization are done to increase efficiency and control of the labor process. As a result, teachers' control over timing, over defining appropriate practices and over criteria used to indicate acceptable performance is taken over by management personnel (who are usually separated from the context of the work). As Apple points out, "deskilling, then, often leads to the atrophy of valuable skills that workers possessed, since there is no longer any 'need' for them..." (1986, p. 209).

The increased specialization and routinization of reskilled jobs is accompanied by <u>intensification</u>--that is, "more, quicker, faster." Aspects of intensification are increasingly found in schools dominated by prespecified curricula, repeated testing, and strict and reductive accountability systems (Apple 1986). These procedures affect the structure of teachers' work by increasing the amount of time spent on administrative matters and require them to rely even more heavily on ideas and processes provided by "experts." For example, increased time spent on test-taking skills, or drilling students on test items. As responsibility for creating one's own curriculum decreases,

technical and management concerns become the foremost part of teachers' work.

Shared or joint decision making, as it currently operates in schools, is one way in which the realm of teacher professionalism is strictly defined in order to place rational limits on areas of teacher involvement. For example Erlandson and Bifano (1987) state that,

> Shared decision making in the school does not mean indiscriminate involvement of teachers in all decisions. Their professionalism suggests that they are best involved in decisions relating to their expertise. (p. 34)

By strictly redefining and controlling teachers' labor, the argument can be made that the degree of teachers' participation in decision making should increase only has the consequences of the decisions affect a narrowly defined "area of expertise." In other words, it is only in decisions of a technical nature that teachers have the most interest and the most expertise and should be involved (see Erlandson and Bifano, 1987).

Shared decision making is then construed as a way of extending and enhancing administrative control over a wider range of decisional issues. Share decision making increases the involvement of teachers in limited areas of decision making, leaving intact and even enhancing the hierarchical structure of schools.

It's paradoxical that a situation which has led to the slow erosion of teachers control over their jobs has been combined with the rhetoric of increased professionalism. Professionalism and increased responsibility go hand in hand, however, in this case teachers find themselves making more technical/management decisions, working longer hours, and having less control over the curricula they teach.

So what's the verdict in our exercise to distinguish fact from opinion in the statement that: "Efforts to achieve empowerment for teachers, such as "shared decision-making" in schools, have been positive steps toward a professional and autonomous role for teachers in schools." This analysis suggests that Hunt and Metcalf were right. Even relatively neutral statements reflect acts of valuation. It is evident that our current conceptions of teacher professionalism and reform measures taken on the basis of these conceptions serve specific interests within education. My suggestion is that the interests served to this point in the process of "professionalizing" teaching may not include the teachers themselves. We must not confuse losses and victories. Teachers have made important advances toward autonomous professionalism, however it is important that increased control over predefined technical/managerial decisions not be equated with increased professionalism. To be truly autonomous professionals teachers will have to regain control over the curriculum as well as school organization issues and develop a much

stronger voice in the production of knowledge about teaching.

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